

Conference Review

Rapport de colloque

Material Culture Worlds: A Report on Three Conferences

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A review of: "Commonplace Things: Simple Choices," a study day on the history and theory of consumption, held at the National Railway Museum, 5 October 1996, York, England; "Folk Art: Is It All Over?," a conference sponsored by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 6–9 March 1997, Halifax, Nova Scotia; and "Common Ground: Contemporary Craft, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts," a conference sponsored by the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft, 21–23 March 1997, Montreal, Quebec.

Material culture scholars are familiar with Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), a seminal study of how the collection and display of works of fine art in Western European societies are socially constructed activities, grounded in particular cultures at particular times. So it is with different scholarly worlds interested in the things that fall under the rubric of material culture. While there is a certain core of literature that has become standard as key statements of what material culture studies encompass, much continues to be written that stretches the boundaries of what might fall under this term we all share. Three conferences that were held in the past year indicate how broad our definitions have become, and how different groups look at the artifact in different ways.

"Commonplace Things: Simple Choices" was that typically British institution: a "study day." Organized by Stephen Hayward, Institute of Design, University of Teeside, the one-day meeting was held at the National Railway Museum in York, England, and featured eleven speakers. The sessions were arranged somewhat chronologically by topic, beginning with the "early modern" (ca 1500–1700) period,

and finishing with contemporary concerns. All the objects discussed were British.

Material culture studies — as we think of them in North America — appear under different guises in the United Kingdom. For years now, History of Design scholars have been in the forefront of much theorizing about objects. Given this trend, many of the speakers in this symposium currently are located in colleges of art or schools of design, some having studied at the Royal College of Art and Victoria and Albert Museum's postgraduate programs.

As in North America, however, British historians have often been slow to turn their attention to the artifact as a source of information and a topic of study. Because of this conservatism, young historians in the United Kingdom are increasingly focusing on the topic of historical consumption/consumerism. One of the speakers at the conference who is finishing a Ph.D. in History at Oxford pointed out privately that historians can accept consumerism as a "hot topic," and acknowledge that it is under this consumerism theme that material culture can be taught as part of a history curriculum. Indeed, two of the conference themes — design history (within design schools) and consumerism (within more traditional departments like history or archaeology) — are the leading approaches in Britain today.

The initial presentations indicated the links of material culture scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic. Matthew Johnson, an archaeologist at the University of Durham, spoke on "Culture and Carpentry in East Anglian Timber Framed Buildings" (extending a section of his excellent book, *Housing Culture: Traditional Architecture in an English Landscape*, Washington: Smithsonian, 1993, and drawing from his recent

An Archaeology of Capitalism, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Johnson examined the Deetz/Glassie Georgian world thesis as it related to changes in East Anglian carpentry from 1400 to 1700.

Sara Pennell (Newnham College, University of Cambridge) also borrowed from North American historical archaeologists such as Deetz, as well as Anne Yentsch, to sketch an intriguing portrait of the spatial matrix of early modern kitchen goods, using cookery books and diaries. Pennell's work, as well, relied on current British consumerism scholarship, and archaeological theory on spacial matrixes.

The "Commonplace Things" symposium obviously was organized to have a small number of carefully selected papers; this meant that each presentation was engaging intellectually, indicating new directions for scholarship. Helen Clifford (Royal College of Art/Victoria and Albert Museum History of Design Program) dealt with ordinary and luxury metal goods in "Repair, Recycling and the Redundant," pointing out the details of recycling in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century metal goods. Among other issues, she discussed how scholars using historical ledgers and journal books often concentrate on what is manufactured rather than what is repaired — the latter frequently the bulk of the work of any craft producer. She also raised the issue of novelty in artifacts, the desire for novelty something that is only now being recognized as a dominant Western impulse that explains rapid changes in material preferences.

At the other end of the historical spectrum, Judy Attfield, from the Winchester School of Art, presented an engaging and lively discussion of the material culture of conviviality as centred on one artifact-type: the coffee table. Attfield situated the acceptance of the coffee table in the culture of the mid-twentieth century: the craze for coffee bars, the preference for sculptural furniture, the influences of the Utility Furniture scheme. Attfield's argument indicated that the coffee table was one of many objects that were part of what she called the "vernacularization of modernity" — an intriguing concept.

Other papers dealt with topics as diverse as "Non Technological Factors in the Development of the Bicycle" (Nicholas Oddy), the baby pram as a case study of "gendered artifacts" (Jane Tyler), consumer shopping in Manchester (Victoria Kelley), the everyday objects in the working class home (Lucy Faire), and office clerk culture in Victorian Britain (Christopher Beward). Many of the themes of the day were

woven together and re-examined in Colin Campbell's closing discussion of the "Rhetorics of Want and Need."

The "Commonplace Things" symposium obviously highlighted the best of what is going on in British material culture studies. Most of it dealt with historical issues, often focusing either on design or on consumerism. Most papers dealt with mass-produced trade objects, and how these objects relate either to gender or to class. While British scholars sometimes lament the underdeveloped status of material culture research in their own country, this symposium organized by Stephen Hayward indicates that what is being done is exciting and stimulating.

Much more specialized, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) hosted a three-day symposium in Halifax, 6–9 March 1997, with the theme "Folk Art: Is It All Over?" The title was playfully ambiguous; either: (a) folk art is no longer made in a global village where all forms of pure indigenous art no longer exist; or (b), folk art as a concept has been redefined in a postmodern age, and is now recognized to include many forms made by artists of diverse backgrounds and training. Addressing these themes, academics, collectors, museum and gallery curators gathered from both Canada and the United States, giving formal presentations as well as participating in panel discussions that examined a number of specific issues.

Conferences that explore the problematic genre of folk art are not new. The Winterthur Museum hosted a symposium in 1977, followed by an equally famous conference held at the Library of Congress in 1983; the published papers from these meetings are now classic statements on the topic (Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, New York: Norton, for Winterthur Museum, 1980; John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner, eds., *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986). Both of these gatherings brought together two groups: those interested in the history of folk art forms and collecting (often collectors/curators) and those interested in studying folk art as an index to other cultural issues (often social scientists and aestheticians based at universities).

These two conferences at Winterthur and the Library of Congress are now legendary, in part for the heated debates that broke out between these two groups. In fact, those interested in folk art scholarship still refer to the "shootout at Winterthur." Each group obviously had very different ideas about what

folk art is and different reasons why it should be studied.

In its overall tone, the Halifax conference seemed tame (generally) by comparison. Tame not in its level of intellectual engagement, but tame in the consensus that seemed to emerge from the meeting. Two keynote speakers touched on what seemed to be quite similar themes. In his opening keynote address, Bruce Fergusson, President of the New York Academy of Art, treated the audience to a broad exposure to art forms, folk and otherwise: tramp art, billboards, naïve paintings, modernist sculptures — all to urge the art community to move beyond the assumption that folk art was simply the art of some rural isolated Other.

In his paper, Gerard Wertkin, Director of the Museum of American Folk Art, did much the same, but came from the opposite direction. He argued through the stereotypical folk art canon — using things like New Mexico santos, Pennsylvania German *fraktur*, and New England weathervanes — that folk art had the same ability to make the profoundly inspiring commentaries on the human condition as any product of a formally trained elite artist.

What added to the dialogue — and what made this conference radically different from its American predecessors — is that so-called folk artists gave presentations themselves and participated in debates, both formally and informally. Three artists participated in a panel entitled “Folk Art: Adopted Style or a State of Being?” and it was here that a lively discussion emerged as to how researchers and curators should actually engage artists, especially on the important questions of marketing and display of their products. And — echoing the keynote speakers — artists asked conference participants why their work should be prefaced by “folk.”

Many of the papers were useful in delineating the traditions of folk art scholarship. John Fleming, for example, managed to sketch quite a broad picture of how folk art objects have been defined and used by both academics and curators alike. His paper was an important grounding that was an academic springboard for other discussion.

It was unfortunate that the program did not include papers that could have focused on some of the points that could be made only briefly. This might have included a critique of the growing folk art scholarship produced by folklorists and anthropologists led by scholars that Fleming had time to only mention briefly — Michael Owen Jones and Henry Glassie —

or recent work influenced by their research, such as the “Folk Arts and Artists” series, published by the University Press of Mississippi, that now numbers over eleven volumes.

Little mention was made at the conference, as well, of the ground-breaking work currently being done on folk art by ethnologists in Europe (a good example is Barbro S. Klein and Mats Widbom, eds., *Swedish Folk Art: All Tradition is Change*, New York: Abrams, 1994).

More might have been included from other parts of Canada. Only one presentation dealt with French-language material, although there is now a massive scholarship on Quebec and Acadian folk art. As well, comparisons with work across the country might have added to the debate on the definitional scope of the term; scholars might have addressed work on other Canadian traditions such as Ukrainians, Germans, or even Anglos. How native art fits into this larger equation was not addressed either, but this becomes an issue for another conference.

Many of the speakers obviously had direct or indirect connections either with the AGNS itself or Nova Scotia generally. While this might have limited the usefulness of a conference in other circumstances, it led to an understanding of how interest in folk art emerged in Nova Scotia — all the key players were there — and thus the conference chronicled the institutionalization of this art form in the region — an unintended but welcomed effect of the meeting.

If there was a unity to the presentations, it was echoed in the keynote speeches and the folk artist panels. And this was that the use of the term folk art should, indeed, be over with. That what exists should be considered as art: not some hyphenated form of art (folk art, outsider art, naïve art or whatever), not the art of the Other, but art, pure and simple. While this might not be new for readers of scholars like Glassie, its discussion at a conference of curators and collectors makes its consideration important and exciting.

It seemed to be a pleasant coincidence, then, that conference participants unintentionally reaffirmed what the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia has tried to do over the years — include the art of ordinary people alongside the art of the elite. How this intellectual sophistication can impact on the institutions of the art world remains problematic; we still have folk art galleries and collectors and festivals.

Perhaps the only stereotype that remained largely unchallenged at this symposium was

that art (labelled in the past as folk) still seemed to be associated with painting and sculpture. Yet, some presentations did challenge this notion. Janice Rahn's paper dealt with graffiti murals in Montreal, Bruce Fergusson mentioned the art of Web sites on the internet, Pascale Galipeau discussed mass-produced and hand-painted plaster mould wall decorations. These are obviously encouraging signs that art is, indeed, all over.

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia plans to publish a conference proceedings. While this will add to the growing literature, it is unfortunate that some of the more informal presentations and exchanges by artists and collectors will not resonate with the same richness in print that they did in the informal contexts. But that is why conferences are the artistic events that they are. Bernard Riordan, Director of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, and Virginia Stephen, Conference Organizer, produced an important symposium that marks an important step to begin to think more critically about folk art research, collection and curation in Canada. Through their efforts, this important conference has begun a dialogue that hopefully will continue in the upcoming years.

Equally specialized, the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft, under the direction of Rosalyn Morrison, sponsored a three-day colloquium in Montreal, 21–23 March 1997, with the theme: "Common Ground: Contemporary Craft, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts." This is the second conference organized by the Institute; their first ground-breaking conference occurred in 1994, "Making and Metaphor," leading to a book with the same name published by the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1994.

The Institute comprises people who are primarily interested in a very specific material culture: the world of the contemporary studio craftsperson. With this interest front and centre, the symposium heard themes recurrent among this community: what is the boundary (if any) between craft and art? How does a particular craft reflect a maker's ideals? Who decides canons of taste? What impact does the market have on production? While questions such as these might sound somewhat insular to the craft community, the Institute has tried to build bridges between practising craftspeople and academics who study craft in society. Thus, this conference included not only practitioners of craft, and practitioners of architecture, but anthropologists, folklorists, design historians, and cultural critics.

"Common Ground" had as one of its primary intentions the examination of links that exist between those involved in craft and those involved in buildings. It became immediately obvious that the term "craft" had different meanings for different groups. For craft practitioners, craft covered those elite objects produced by studio artists often for limited markets. When architects dealt with craft, they usually limited this to the surface decorations of a building, the installed decorative elements. These usages are quite different to the anthropological use of craft: often quite all-encompassing (even to include the craft of architecture), often made for either popular consumption or for individual household use.

This diversity of conceptions of craft meant that the subject matter of presentations was quite diverse. In some cases, papers would not be strictly speaking considered material culture topics. Rather, they dealt with the realities of architectural design, the nuances of a particular architectural school, or the range of one maker's work, and how these have contributed to the overall commissions of particular buildings.

Some papers by architects did begin to make connections with the "culture" component of material culture. John L. Brown, from the University of Calgary, discussed how architects were attempting to understand ordinary modern wood frame construction as a system of vernacular building (only one out of perhaps ten presentations by architects, by the way, that acknowledged the importance of vernacular forms). Michael McClelland, speaking on the "Canonic Interpretation of the Object," discussed how architects create heritage canons in their restoration work on historic structures.

More of this kind of self-reflection is needed on the culture of architects. In fact, some of the formal and informal commentaries by architects throughout the conference indicated a genuine scepticism about the possibility of cultural relativism when it came to building design and use. But architectural culture is a subject for still another conference.

Several presentations moved beyond aesthetic reflection or artifact celebration to genuine cultural issues and concerns. Rae Anderson, an anthropologist working in Toronto, described a project where ethnographic observation and interviewing joined forces with an architectural firm in order to produce large-scale housing initiatives for the homeless in the city. Penelope Kokkinos produced an insightful and sensitive paper on

how personal artifacts provide meaning in an individual's life during key periods. She examined how human beings turn to crafts in times of transience, transition and transgression to attach meaning to static creations.

Her work on these categories obviously adds to the earlier research on everyday objects by Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, Eugene Rochberg-Halton and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, or the recent work by David Halle, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

The final session of the conference dealt with "Museums and the Future of Craft, Decorative Art, and Design." Here presentations were given on the history of collecting/displaying the decorative arts at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Musée du Québec, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Much of the discussion here focused on what strengths each institution had in terms of its collection. Again, these were mainly in the area of studio crafts. One would have liked the non-elite or non-European crafts represented here: institutions strong in native craft, or vernacular craft. Stephen Inglis (Director General, Research, Canadian Museum of Civilization), in his concluding remarks to this section, mentioned some of the important recent ethnographies of museums and their visitors, studies by scholars such as Susan Pearce or Grant McCracken. For material culture scholars (rather than aestheticians), it is here that important and exciting work is beginning to emerge within the museum world.

"Common Ground: Contemporary Craft, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts" indicates just how contentious even the words that we use are. As material culture researchers, this conference shows how various artifact

categories in our own world have specific cultures: in this case, the culture of studio craft, the culture of architectural craft, the culture of culturally relativistic ethnographers of craft.

The Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft has provided an important forum for material culture researchers to begin to investigate such issues. Hopefully the Institute will not take the simple way out, and confine craft to the world of studio design and the craft college. Instead, we need to continue to venture into the entire world of craft — from Martha Stewart to Peter Powning to the books on pantyhose craft or the Reader's Digest *Complete Do-It-Yourself Manual*.

These three conferences show very different material culture worlds: one largely governed by the academic study of design history and consumer, one filled with not just academics but artists and collectors, and one attempting to bridge gaps between two different artifact forms and therefore traditions of scholarship. The organizers of all three conferences intend to publish some form of proceedings. The diversity of the themes, theories, and participants indicates that the study of material culture really must encompass quite a broad purview.

What seems to occur in this diversity is that scholars from quite different backgrounds at times arrive at the same question: how can we understand the role of particular objects in a particular culture? The more we strive to link together people who are interested in answers to this question, the more likely it will be that our answers will improve. We realize that people move in different material culture scholarship worlds out there, perhaps not always using the same terms, or reading the same books. But a commonality is still there — not in all cases — but often enough. The more we challenge ourselves to confront as many material culture worlds as possible, the better we will be able to understand where we still need to go.